

## Transforming Religious Authority: Islamic Epistemology in the Digital Age

Muhamdi Ali<sup>1\*</sup>, Awan Farih<sup>2</sup>, Sholahuddin Al Ayubi<sup>3</sup>, Andi Rosa<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1,2,3,4</sup> Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin Banten, Indonesia

\* [242631111.muhamdiali@uinbanten.ac.id](mailto:242631111.muhamdiali@uinbanten.ac.id)

### Abstrak

Pesatnya perkembangan teknologi digital telah membawa perubahan substansial dalam produksi, distribusi, dan validasi pengetahuan Islam, yang memicu tantangan epistemologis mendasar terkait otoritas dan legitimasi wacana keagamaan di era media sosial. Studi ini secara kritis menganalisis bagaimana digitalisasi mentransformasi otoritas keagamaan tradisional dan merekonstruksi epistemologi pemikiran Islam kontemporer, dengan fokus pada pergeseran pola produksi, validasi, dan distribusi pengetahuan agama. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif yang mengintegrasikan studi literatur dan Analisis Wacana Kritis (CDA) model Fairclough, penelitian ini menganalisis literatur akademis dan konten digital untuk membongkar dimensi ideologis dan relasi kuasa di balik pergeseran epistemologis dalam wacana Islam daring. Hasilnya menunjukkan bahwa digitalisasi menggeser produksi pengetahuan dari kerangka institusional-hierarkis menuju ruang yang lebih fleksibel, partisipatif, dan digerakkan oleh algoritma, di mana validasi kini lebih bergantung pada metrik popularitas daripada akurasi ilmiah. Pergeseran ini memunculkan populisme epistemik yang menggantikan otoritas ilmiah dengan pengaruh performatif, berimplikasi pada penurunan kedalaman metodologis dan polarisasi identitas Islam. Kajian ini berkesimpulan bahwa digitalisasi berperan sebagai agen transformasi epistemologi yang menuntut pengembangan epistemologi Islam hibrida, yang memadukan nilai-nilai ilmiah klasik dengan metode partisipatif digital demi menjaga integritas keilmuan.

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**Kata Kunci:** Epistemologi Islam, Otoritas Keagamaan, Media Sosial, Analisis Wacana Kritis, Populisma Epistemik

## **Abstract**

*The rapid development of digital technology has brought substantial changes in the production, distribution, and validation of Islamic knowledge, triggering fundamental epistemological challenges regarding the authority and legitimacy of religious discourse in the social media era. This study critically analyzes how digitalization transforms traditional religious authority and reconstructs the epistemology of contemporary Islamic thought, focusing on shifting patterns of production, validation, and distribution of religious knowledge. Using a qualitative approach that integrates literature studies and Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this study analyzes academic literature and digital content to uncover the ideological dimensions and power relations behind epistemological shifts in online Islamic discourse. The results show that digitalization shifts knowledge production from an institutional-hierarchical framework to a more flexible, participatory, and algorithm-driven space, where validation now relies more on popularity metrics than scientific accuracy. This shift gives rise to epistemic populism that replaces scientific authority with performative influence, implicating a decline in methodological depth and the polarization of Islamic identity. This study concludes that digitalization acts as an agent of epistemological transformation that demands the development of a hybrid Islamic epistemology, which combines classical scientific values with digital participatory methods to maintain scientific integrity.*

**Keywords:** *Islamic Epistemology, Religious Authority, Social Media, Critical Discourse Analysis, Epistemic Populism*

## **Introduction**

In the modern era, digital technology has brought revolutionary changes in the way of communication and dissemination of knowledge, including in the religious context. Social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok are now the main landscape for the spread of Islamic discourse in various parts of the world. This transformation not only affects the speed and reach of the dissemination of religious information, but also fundamentally triggers a significant shift in the structure and dynamics of previously established religious authority (Naufal et al., 2025). This new dynamic presents a series of profound epistemological challenges that require serious examination in contemporary Islamic studies.

Before the digital era, the legitimacy and authorization of Islamic knowledge was largely centered in traditional institutions such as Islamic study groups, Islamic boarding schools, and Islamic universities, and held by scholars who had clear and verified scientific chains. However, social media has created a new arena that challenges this monopoly of authority. Participation in Islamic discourse has become broader, allowing the involvement of the general public, historians, and even public figures without going through formal channels of authority (Dahlan et al., 2025). As a result, the system of religious authority transformed from a rigid top-down model to a more open, distributed,

and multidirectional one, with interpretations of Islamic teachings becoming more diverse, popular, and accessible (Mohiuddin, 2023). This phenomenon creates what is known as liquid religious authority, where the boundaries of authority become blurred and dynamic (Hakim & Mukhlis, 2023).

Unfortunately, the expansion of access to Islamic knowledge in the digital realm has crucial epistemological consequences. In the digital environment, validation and debate about Islamic truth often no longer rely solely on academic authority or rigorous scientific methodology, but rather on popularity metrics, platform algorithms, and content appeal (Tucker et al., 2018). The filter bubble and echo chamber phenomena have exacerbated this condition, causing the spread of religious information to often be limited to narrow channels that reinforce bias and minimize differences of opinion (Andok, 2023). In this context, established religious authority is delegitimized through several complex mechanisms: (1) Scientific legitimacy is no longer the monopoly of scholars or formal institutions, but is contested by popular figures on social media; (2) Validation of Islamic knowledge is shifting from strict scientific methods (such as *sanad* and peer review) to digital metrics such as likes, views, and shares; and (3) The spread of religious discourse is no longer dominated by authoritative institutions, but by algorithms that determine the visibility and popularity of content.

This situation raises serious concerns about the legitimacy of scientific authority and epistemic integrity in an open and participatory digital environment. Digitalization has enabled the emergence of individuals who claim to be religious references without any valid academic or scientific basis. Consequently, the difference between personal opinion, credible fatwas, and proven scientific knowledge is increasingly difficult to distinguish. This scenario opens up opportunities for the reduction of the meaning of Islamic teachings, the misuse of religious discussions for certain ideological purposes, and even radicalization (Dodego & Witro, 2020). Therefore, this significant epistemological challenge demands a comprehensive academic response to understand and ensure the preservation of authentic and relevant Islamic knowledge in the digital age.

Although the digitalization of Islam has been widely studied from various perspectives such as sociological, political, and cultural (Judijanto & Barus, 2024; Syamraeni et al., 2024; Turhamun, 2022), the transformation of religious authority and its epistemological implications still require further attention. Existing studies often have not systematically dissected how the nature, sources, and validity of Islamic knowledge itself have shifted in the digital space. This study aims to fill this gap by critically analyzing how traditional religious authority is transformed and how the epistemology of Islamic thought is reconstructed in the contemporary digital realm. More specifically, this study seeks to: (1) identify patterns of challenges to religious authority in social media; (2)

examine how these changes affect the process of production, validation, and dissemination of Islamic knowledge; and (3) critically reflect on how Islamic epistemology is conceptually reshaped in the digital space. Using a qualitative approach that integrates comprehensive literature studies with Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this study analyzes academic literature and representative digital content. This study is expected to provide theoretical contributions to contemporary Islamic studies by offering a sharper analytical framework regarding the dynamics of digital epistemology. In addition, this study also provides practical insights for academics, religious authorities, and Muslim communities in facing the complexity and challenges of science in the digital era.

## **Research Method**

This study uses a qualitative methodology with a literature study strategy to investigate the transformation of Islamic epistemology in the digital era. The literature study was chosen because it is relevant to the research focus on written and documentary sources, which are used to study the deconstruction of religious authority in Islamic discourse on social media. This method facilitates an in-depth examination of changes in the knowledge framework and legitimacy of Islamic scientific authorities in the digital environment (Adlini et al., 2022; Chigbu et al., 2023).

The data in this study is sourced from various relevant academic literature, including books, scientific journal articles, research reports, and digital documents that discuss the theme of Islamic digitalization and Islamic scientific epistemology. The study collected secondary data, including academic research that analyzed Islamic content on social media. The analysis was conducted to gain a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of Islamic discourse in the digital realm, which includes the processes of production, validation, and distribution of knowledge, with a particular focus on how religious authority is deconstructed in these processes.

The Norman Fairclough model, specifically the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach, was used to analyze the data. Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach was chosen for its ability to unpack the interactions between texts, discursive practices, and social practices (Dahlborg et al., 2024). In this context, CDA serves not only to identify language patterns but also to uncover hidden power relations and ideologies that shape digital religious discourse.

To optimize critical discourse analysis (CDA), this study applies Fairclough's model, focusing on three interconnected levels. First, the textual dimension, the analysis

will examine in-depth the word choices, metaphors, and sentence structures used in digital content, such as short video lectures. The aim is to demonstrate how these elements systematically simplify complex religious issues and marginalize more nuanced narratives, often by utilizing emotionally charged diction and militaristic rhetoric to mobilize audiences.

Second, the discursive practice dimension will highlight the processes of production, distribution, and consumption of this discourse on social media. This analysis will reveal the role of algorithms as new “gatekeepers” that determine the visibility and popularity of content. The role of this algorithm fundamentally shifts the focus of knowledge validation from scientific accuracy and rigorous methodology to digital popularity metrics, such as likes and shares.

Finally, in the social practice dimension, the analysis will connect textual and discursive findings with broader social implications. This includes how shifts in religious authority and the dominance of popular discourse contribute to the phenomenon of epistemic populism, ultimately triggering the polarization of Islamic identity and the weakening of deep scholarly traditions such as *tahqiq* (verification) and *sanad* (chains of scholarly transmission). Thus, CDA will be used not only to describe the phenomenon but also to unravel the power relations and ideologies operating within the contemporary digital Islamic knowledge ecosystem.

Due to its qualitative nature, this study did not conduct direct experiments or statistical tests. However, to maintain the validity of the results, systematic thematic analysis methods and CDA frameworks are used. This method is also in line with the structure of the discussion of the results of the article, which includes epistemological contestation in digital Islamic discourse and patterns of knowledge production, validation, and distribution (Novendawati Wahyu, 2022), with an emphasis on how religious authorities undergo transformation in this context.

## Results and Discussion

### Paradigm Transformation of Authority and Epistemology in Digital Ecosystem

The transformation of Islamic epistemology in the digital era marks a significant transition from a framework that relies on *sanad* and institutional authority to a more inclusive and participatory paradigm of knowledge creation, while transforming traditional religious authority. In the classical paradigm, the legitimacy of knowledge is built through authentic transmission, institutional support, and strict scientific ethics

(Ulya & Nikmah, 2024). However, the reality of the digital space shows that non-academic actors, such as religious influencers, can build scholarly authority through levels of engagement and virality, which delegitimizes the authority of traditional ulama (Hidayatullah, 2024). This authority no longer depends on *sanad* or institutional legitimacy, but rather on the ability to touch emotions and build mass networks (Hakim & Mukhlis, 2023). As a result, the production of Islamic knowledge in the digital era has become more inclusive but also vulnerable to methodological deviations and substantive narrowing, which ultimately challenges epistemic depth.

This shift in authority was accompanied by a weakening of the position of traditional “gatekeepers” in the dissemination of Islamic knowledge. Religious institutions that once served as the primary filters for the validity and authenticity of discourse now have to compete with platforms and individuals that have mass reach without having to go through formal legitimacy processes (Hidayatullah, 2024). This creates an environment in which personal charisma, digital rhetorical skills, and social media savvy become the new attributes of authority. As a result, previously rigid and linear hierarchies of authority (from senior scholars to students, from institutions to the public) become more fluid, decentralized, and polycentric, where multiple “centers” of authority can emerge organically from online interactions (Saputra & Fadhli, 2020). This flexibility opens up opportunities for minority voices to be heard, but also has the potential to blur the lines between valid scholarship and unsubstantiated opinion.

It is in this context that the phenomenon of epistemic populism emerges, where the validity of a religious argument is no longer judged based on its methodological accuracy or scientific depth, but rather by its level of popularity and acceptance among the masses. Digital metrics such as likes, shares, views, and engagement rates have become de facto indicators of new “validity” (Drivas et al., 2022). “Viral” discourse tends to be considered more true or relevant, regardless of the quality of its substance (Khanom, 2023). This epistemic populism encourages the production of content that is sensational, emotional, and often simplifies complex issues into black-and-white dichotomies, because such formats are more likely to attract attention and generate engagement on social media (Karnouskos, 2020). As a consequence, there is a reduction in the depth of arguments, a lack of nuance, and a shift from rational-scientific reasoning to emotional persuasion, which leads to the potential for narrowing the substance of Islamic knowledge and polarization of views.

Therefore, the transformation of religious authority and the emergence of epistemic populism are closely intertwined, forming a new digital Islamic knowledge ecosystem. Authority is now not only about who speaks, but how the message is perceived and spread among the masses (Sandel & Ju, 2019). This transition represents a profound shift in the way Islamic knowledge is produced, validated, and consumed (Yurtseven, 2025). To understand in more detail how this shift manifests itself in everyday discursive practices, the next section will delve into a critical discourse analysis of concrete examples of religious content on social media, particularly in the context of short da'wah videos, to unravel the textual dimensions, discursive practices, and social practices involved.

### **Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of Digital Manifestations of Religious Authority**

For example, in a critical discourse analysis using Fairclough's model (1995), it was found that short preaching videos by puritan and radical Islamic preachers often simplified the concept of jihad into a basic motivational call, without the context of fiqh or other disciplines (Khalilullah, 2024). In the textual dimension, the analysis revealed a simplification of substance and a dominance of performative elements (Hermawan & Hamdani, 2023). The narratives used in these videos rely heavily on emotional diction and militaristic metaphors, such as "rise up", "fight laziness", and "be a warrior". This use of language is not merely rhetorical style, but rather an ideological practice that systematically conditions audiences to respond to religious teachings based on their psychological impact, rather than their methodological validity (Konat et al., 2024).

In the discursive practice dimension, this discourse production shifts the focus from rational argumentation to emotional appeals (Mudiawati et al., 2023). This shift creates a new power relationship in which scholars or digital influencers establish authority not through academic credentials, but through their ability to create engaging and viral content (Mubarok & Sunarto, 2024). The legitimacy of discourse is no longer determined by sanad (*sanad*) or scholarship, but by digital metrics such as likes, shares, and views (Ulya & Nikmah, 2024). This fundamentally delegitimizes traditional scientific authority rooted in institutions and rigorous methodologies. Meanwhile, in the dimension of social practice, this reflects a shift in authority structures, where digital popularity replaces traditional scientific authority (Salsabilla et al., 2025). This shift leads to a reduction in epistemic depth in digital discourse, which should be based on methodological prudence. Thus, this transformation creates a shift from scientific authority to the authority of impressions, supported by a systematic analysis of how digital texts interact with broader discursive and social practices.

This narrative approach that tends to prioritize emotional effects over epistemic reasoning has become a dominant strategy in building authority in the digital space. Further textual analysis reveals the use of militaristic metaphors and calls to action designed to trigger instant responses and emotional loyalty from the audience (Castro Seixas, 2021). This is not simply a rhetorical style, but rather a discursive practice that systematically conditions audiences to respond to religious teachings based on their psychological impact, rather than on their methodological validity or argumentative depth (Rahman, 2025). The implication for social practice is the occurrence of fast-food knowledge in a religious context, where concise, easily digestible and provocative content is more valued than discourse that requires critical thinking and in-depth study (Sutikno & Kholiq, 2025). This phenomenon reinforces the shift from authority built on *sanad* (chain of knowledge transmission) to authority based on sensation and popularity.

The findings of this critical discourse analysis directly support the arguments put forward in the previous sub-heading regarding epistemic populism and the transformation of religious authority. The dominance of performative and emotional elements in digital religious discourse shows how engagement metrics (such as likes and shares) have replaced scientific criteria as determinants of “validity” and “authority” (Mannerfelt, 2022). This creates an environment where the “truth” of religious discourse is no longer measured by its accuracy or scientific depth, but rather by its ability to resonate emotionally and achieve mass reach (Susan & Singgih, 2023). This shift from scientific authority to the authority of impressions fundamentally challenges the epistemic depth of Islam, as the processes of production, validation, and consumption of knowledge tend to ignore the methodological rigor and intellectual nuance required in the classical Islamic scientific tradition.

This condition is in line with research (Wallace, 2017) which identified a shift in knowledge gatekeeping from traditional institutions to individuals, algorithms and digital platforms, emphasizing how visibility is now determined by digital dynamics. In addition, these findings enrich the understanding of how filter bubbles and echo chambers (Wulandari et al., 2021) not only limit exposure to information, but also actively shape and reinforce narrow and epistemologically biased religious discourses. The phenomenon of “liquid authority” described by (Hidayat & Samiaji, 2025) is also confirmed, where legitimacy becomes more fragmentary and shifts easily. Thus, this analysis not only confirms the trends that have been identified in the literature on the digitalization of religion (Pabbajah, 2024), but also adds a specific dimension to how textual and discursive changes in digital content contribute to a fundamental reconfiguration of Islamic authority and epistemology in the contemporary era.

## Synthesis of Findings and Epistemological Implications

After comprehensively analyzing the transformation of religious authority and its manifestations in digital discourse, this study synthesizes several key findings that have significant epistemological implications. First, digitalization has fundamentally transformed traditional religious authority, shifting it from an institutional-hierarchical framework based on *sanad* and scientific legitimacy to a more fluid, participatory arena, often driven by digital popularity metrics (Astor et al., 2024). Second, the emergence of religious influencers and the dominance of emotional diction in the production of digital religious discourse have given rise to the phenomenon of epistemic populism, where the validity of knowledge is increasingly determined by the level of virality and emotional engagement of the masses, rather than by methodological prudence or scientific depth (Nawrocki, 2024).

Through critical discourse analysis, it demonstrates how these discursive practices lead to a simplification of substance and a shift from rational argument to emotional appeals. This is a shift from scientific to performative authority, ideologically placing popular validity above methodological validity (Hidayatullah, 2024). The implication is that this opens up space for epistemic populism, where truth is determined by emotional resonance and mass reach, rather than by scientific depth or the verification process (*tahqiq*) that characterized the classical Islamic scientific tradition (Saputra & Fadhli, 2020).

The profound implications of this shift in epistemic authority and populism for the nature of Islamic knowledge are crucial. In the digital environment, the process of belief formation is no longer solely dependent on the guidance of proven scientific authorities, but is instead influenced by personalized algorithms, filter bubbles, and echo chambers that tend to reinforce cognitive biases and limit exposure to diverse views (Andok, 2023). As a result, Muslims face major challenges in obtaining and validating authentic religious information, as the lines between fact, opinion, and manipulation become blurred (Whyte, 2022). Epistemic depth is threatened by the priority of speed and reach, which often overlooks the essence of *tahqiq* (verification) and *tadabbur* (deep contemplation) that characterize the Islamic scientific tradition (Akbar et al., 2024).

Thus, the findings of this study explicitly emphasize that digitalization not only deconstructs traditional religious authority, but also actively reconstructs the epistemology of Islamic thought (Lutfi & Suhermanto Ja'far, 2023). This reconstruction is not completely destructive, but rather an adaptation and reconfiguration in facing new realities (Lutfi & Suhermanto Ja'far, 2023). In this context, digitalization demands the development of a hybrid Islamic epistemology (Hawasi, 2015). This hybrid epistemology does not mean sacrificing classical scientific principles such as *sanad*, text-based *ijtihad*,

and peer review, but rather integrating them with the participatory and dynamic reality of digital space (Bashori et al., 2023). This means encouraging critical media literacy for Muslims, developing methods of validating religious knowledge that are responsive to digital metrics but still based on scientific integrity, and seeking new formats for the dissemination of in-depth knowledge that can compete with populist content.

This study makes a significant theoretical contribution by offering a comprehensive analytical framework for understanding the dynamics of digital epistemology in the Islamic context. Unlike previous studies that may have focused more on the sociological or political aspects of the digitalization of religion, this study specifically highlights shifts at the level of production, validation, and the nature of knowledge itself through the lens of CDA. In practical terms, these findings urge religious authorities, Islamic educational institutions, and scholars to develop adaptive strategies (Yusuf et al., 2024). These include adopting digital platforms strategically, formulating digital ethics guidelines for religious discourse, and investing in critical education for Muslims to be able to distinguish credible sources of information from those that are not (Hidayatulah et al., 2025).

However, this study has limitations, especially in its qualitative focus and reliance on the analysis of specific discursive examples. It does not involve a quantitative survey of audience perceptions or the long-term impact of epistemic populism. Therefore, future research could explore broader empirical dimensions, such as studies of social media users' reception of digital religious authority, cross-platform comparisons, or longitudinal analyses to track the evolution of authority and epistemology. In addition, research could focus on developing a concrete model of "hybrid Islamic epistemology" and how it can be implemented in contemporary Islamic education curricula or online community initiatives.

## Conclusion

This study concludes that digitalization is not simply a new distribution medium, but rather an agent of fundamental transformation in the epistemology of Islamic thought. Social media has become an increasingly fragmented, personalized, and populist arena for the production of religious knowledge, replacing the previously dominant institutional-hierarchical framework. This digitalization process, with its interactive features, creates new patterns of relationships between producers and consumers of Islamic discourse, where the lines of demarcation of religious authority become more inclusive and fluid.

However, this openness also creates significant vulnerability to the simplification of scientific content and the simplification of religious understanding. These findings

crucially emphasize that the transformation is not simply about who has the right to speak (authority), but also about how the truth and validity of knowledge itself are determined. We find a substantial shift from *ijtihad* based on the interpretation of authoritative texts and classical methodologies (such as *usul al-fiqh*) to interpretations that are more user-driven (user-generated) and algorithmically validated through popularity and virality. Thus, the fundamental epistemic structure of Islam is undergoing a profound reconfiguration.

Using a qualitative research design that integrates literature review and critical discourse analysis, this study provides a foundation for understanding the complexities of this transformation. Given the dynamic nature of the digital landscape, this study recommends further research through fieldwork involving empirical data from social media users and Islamic virtual communities. The integration of contextual and sociological data will complement the theoretical and analytical dimensions outlined. The implications of this study not only highlight challenges but also urge the need for methodological innovation in Islamic studies that is responsive to the digital world, as well as encouraging the development of digital-epistemic literacy for Muslims to navigate the sea of religious information critically and wisely.

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